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Maya Spirituality in the World Today

JORGE R. ROGACHEVSKY

As the Christian world prepares for the coming of the second millennium, the Maya world in Mesoamerica is also preparing for a momentous new stage in the unfolding of the temporal dimension. The year 2012 A.D. will mark the beginning of a new era, with the initiation of a new 13-stage cycle of 400-year units, of 360 days each, which defines the 5200-year Long Count of the Maya. According to Maya belief, the current era began in what the Christian calendar would define as the year 3114 B.C., long before any human beings had ever conceived of a Christian world view.

I would assume that these very basic details about Maya culture and world view are unfamiliar to generally well educated readers, and even to those who may have had a long-standing interest in Central America. There has been a long history of obfuscation which has hidden the Maya world from us.

This history began with the first arrival of the Spaniards and their war of conquest against the Maya population in the sixteenth century. The written record of the Maya, which was quite extensive, and which we need to assume contained historical, religious and scientific information in the *codices* found by the Spaniards, was systematically obliterated in an effort to carry out a full-scale cultural genocide. Of the thousands of *codices* that had been preserved by the post-classic Maya intelligentsia, only four have survived to the present day. One of the results of this devastating challenge to the integrity of Maya culture was that a unique writing system—one of only five independently developed in the history of humankind—was lost to the world for the last four hundred and fifty years, and thereby a formerly literate community was rendered practically illiterate.

During the celebration of the beginning of the Maya ceremonial 260-day calendar, the *tzolkin*, a shaman makes an offering before a Maya cross, representing the tree of life and the four directions of the universe. *Photo by Jorge Rogachevsky*

Subjugation of Maya History

An important outgrowth of this cultural genocide was that the Maya did not enter into the generalized consciousness of the modern world as co-equal participants with other cultures. The Maya came to be seen as a long extinct population, gaining renown for being significantly more exotic if not as ancient as many of the defunct societies of the archaic Mesopotamian world. This perception was aided by the early European and U.S. "discoverers" of the classical era city states, such as Tikal and Palenque. Under the influence of nineteenth century teleological values which saw Western civilization as the pinnacle of human development, other societies came to be seen at best as precursors in

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the Western path towards dominance.

Because the Maya had been driven into a condition of social and cultural subjugation, nobody could imagine that the illiterate and down-trodden peasants that inhabited areas of contemporary Guatemala and southern Mexico were actually the descendants of the people who built the tallest structures in the Americas until the construction of the twentieth century skyscrapers. The classical Maya were relegated to a mythical past that supposedly had no connection to the present. Learned scholars wondered why the Maya had disappeared. Lacking the tools to interpret the Maya monumental carvings—which in the past had communicated volumes regarding Maya history and culture—Mayanists postulated the existence of a civilization of philosopher priests. It was assumed that these priests engaged in a study of the cosmos and revered time as a deity, with no involvement with the day-to-day concerns of building powerful city states and providing for large urbanized populations.

The naivete of these scholars is outstanding when one considers that they did not bother to ask very basic questions, such as who quarried the enormous stones that went into the construction of the massive temples at Tikal; how was this population fed and housed; what created the social bond that made this epic labor meaningful; and what happened to all these people once the authority of the rulers of the city states collapsed? These questions largely went unasked as an image of the exotic and vanished Maya was promulgated in the scholarly and popular literature.

Unveiling Hidden Culture

The veil of exoticism that was placed over classical Maya culture further helped to obscure the extant Maya population from view. If thought of at all, the present-day Maya came to be subsumed under the general category of the Central American peasant, assumed to be predominantly *mestizo* not only in her or his physical characteristics, but also culturally. It has generally been taken for granted, for example, that the Maya are a Christianized population, who may maintain certain rituals and may hold certain beliefs that might appear bizarre to the mainstream of Christian society, but who are nonetheless fully assimilated into the Western fold through their common investment in the divinity of Jesus Christ.

> If the Maya are really taken seriously as a cultural and ethnic group numbering perhaps some eight to ten million people, then *ladino* hegemony in Guatemala and parts of Mexico would be seriously put into question

I would claim that this perception on the part of outsiders is another instance in the long history of displacing real live Maya culture from contemporary consideration. If the Maya can be defined as a Christian population then there is no need to come to terms with truly Maya values and perceptions as a component of the modern world.

There are very specific interests both within and outside of Guatemala, and more recently in Mexico, which would find it advantageous to hide the true nature of Maya culture. If we consider, for example, the ferocious attacks which the Guatemalan army levied against the indigenous population in the late 1970s and early 1980s, we can identify the extreme fear which the prospect of a Maya uprising engendered in the *ladino* (i.e. non-Maya) elite. We can also see how a racially and culturally motivated war was capable of being translated into the ideology of the Cold War precisely because international awareness of the integrity of the Maya community had not yet been generated.

As a point of contrast we may look at the comparative restraint that the Mexican army has had to maintain in the face of an indigenous challenge in the south. The light of public scrutiny had already been focused on the plight of the Maya through, among other efforts, the well-publicized life of the Maya-K'iche' Nobel Peace Laureate, Rigoberta Menchú.

Reclaiming Maya Identity

Currently in the Guatemalan press there is a lively debate being waged regarding the nature of Guatemalan national identity, and in particular the identity of the Maya population. Many *ladino* intellectuals are putting into question the integrity of Maya cultural identity. Among them are some who actively participated in left-wing organizations in the tumultuous conflicts of the post-Arbenz era. These intellectuals refer to such issues as the assimilation by the Maya of Christian religious values, or even the inadmissibility of using the term Maya to refer to a population that is a thousand years removed from the grandeur of Maya civilization. If the Maya are really taken seriously as a cultural and ethnic

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group numbering perhaps some eight to ten million people, then *ladino* hegemony in Guatemala and parts of Mexico would be seriously put into question.

Looking From Different Perspectives

I need to confess that my own notions regarding the Maya had been shaped until relatively recently by ideas that I now reject. I based my perceptions on studies of Caribbean cultures and the type of syncretism between Christian and African religous cultures which one finds in places such as Haiti and Cuba. In these instances, Christian beliefs were joined with African traditions to coalese into a variant of Christian faith. Until I visited Guatemala in 1993, I assumed—like many outsiders and some insiders—that I would find a similar syncretic culture among the Maya.

However, after spending a year in Guatemala, visiting many highland communities, talking with Maya intellectuals, and further studying the evolution of Maya culture, I have come to hold a very different opinion. There is a Maya spirituality which is contemporaneous in the modern world. The strength of this spirituality has maintained social bonds which have allowed Maya culture to survive more than four centuries of subjugation. Some of the key elements of this spirituality are associated with a belief in the cyclical nature of time.

For the Maya, unlike the principal conceptions in Western thought, time is not a straight line, and the past is not something to be transcended, but rather something to be tapped, much as a tree taps into the nutrients of the soil when it extends its roots underground.

This alternative conception of time, if it were made an aspect of modern thought, would potentially lead to a profound rearticulation of the dichotomy between tradition and modernity. This rootedness and centerdness of Maya culture in a conception of tradition as a living force has allowed Maya communities to survive into modern times. This is an aspect of Maya spirituality which may offer valuable assistance to the very contemporary need for redefining our conception of progress.

The models available within the Western tradition for understanding our place within a temporal framework have for the most part led us to an epistemological dead end. The conservative religious tradition continues to postulate a cataclysmic orgy of divine retribution. The liberal capitalist world view offers a hedonistic orgy of consumerism. Neither conception will allow us to address the multiplicity of human needs and problems that currently confront us.

Even much of the radical tradition, in classical Oedipal fashion, has been blinded by its hubris and its belief that progress will redeem us. We are desperately in need of world views that will help us to alter our conception of time as solely an irreversible straight line, so that we can stop and take stock of the multiplicity of world cultures which have evolved over time and which share our contemporary world, both physically and spiritually. The Maya conception of cyclical time can help us formulate such a perspective.

More than that, however, if we are able to lift the veil of obscurity which has been draped over the Maya, we may be able to engage in a dialogue with a cultural tradition which has its roots deeply implanted in the most ancient cultural soil of the Americas. Such a process would open up a rich vein of cultural energy which could create the possibilities for engendering a deeply American cultural Renaissance, whereby the values of *all* Native American societies begin to count once again among the revered traditions of humanity. This reaching back into an autochthonous American past would not be an attempt to reconnect with the mythic pre-history of our continent. Rather it would tap into the efforts of the present-day Maya to develop a political awareness and organizational capabilities which would allow them to make new claims from the vantage point of the most ancient extant tradition. For those of us who inhabit the American soil this reimplanting in the traditions of the land could begin to heal the spiritual wounds created by the genocidal ideology of progress that our Western tradition inflicted.

Jorge R. Rogachevsky teaches Spanish and Latin American studies at St. Mary's College of Maryland.

"Justice, Justice Shall Ye Pursue"

Notes on a Jewish Left

RACHEL ROSENBLOOM

In the spring of 1993, as I stood in front of a Manhattan supermarket handing out leaflets warning of the Religious Right's efforts to take over community school boards in upcoming elections, a passer-by quipped, "So what are you, the religious left?"

Religious left--clearly an oxymoron in his mind, and at the time a rather abstract notion in mine. But here it is 1997 and I find myself spending quite a lot of time, as director of a Jewish social justice organization, thinking about the connections between religion and progressive organizing.

Our work at Jews for Racial and Economic Justice (JFREJ) does not fit easily into conventional notions of faith-based organizing. JFREJ's mission—to make the Jewish community a stronger partner in local social justice struggles—comes as much out of a tradition of secular Jewish radicalism (a tradition that has at times been openly hostile to organized religion) as it does out of the ethical mandate of tikkun olam (mending the world).

In seeking to articulate a Jewish politics committed to alliance-building and progressive social change, we are as likely to invoke the legacy of the Yiddisher Arbeter Bund (Jewish Workers Union)—which organized Jewish workers in Eastern Europe in the early twentieth century and championed a secularist, socialist, diasporic Jewish politics—as we are to invoke the words of socially engaged rabbis such as Abraham Joshua Heschel, or Talmudic injunctions against unfair labor practices. This eclecticism can also be seen in our members, who are drawn to organizing as Jews for a variety of reasons and whose religious affiliations range from atheist to devoutly observant.

Celebrations and Collaborations

While we come to this work from different places, many JFREJ members across the spectrum of religious observance welcome JFREJ's participation in the ongoing Jewish process of reconfiguring ritual in a search for contemporary meaning.

For example, last spring we celebrated Purim by bringing a new twist to the traditional purimspiel, a play telling the story of Esther and Mordechai's triumph over the wicked Haman. After a mini teach-in on workers' rights, a number of young JFREJ members, with their parents and friends in tow, marched in costume to a Disney Store in midtown Manhattan. They then performed an updated purimspiel focusing on the sweatshop conditions in Disney's factories in Haiti and featuring Disney CEO Michael Eisner as a modern-day Haman.

Members of Jews for Racial and Economic Justice march in the Day of Outrage against police brutality and harassment after Abner Louima's beating in August 1997. ***Photo courtesy of JFREJ***

We've also hosted liberation seders and provided alternative holiday texts for our members incorporating issues such as immigrant rights, social service cutbacks, and workfare into the telling of the Passover story of slavery and liberation. Last year we joined forces with Interfaith Voices Against Hunger to mobilize clergy from a number of faiths and denominations in a Passover/Holy Week speakout against city and state budget cuts.

In addition to using Jewish holidays as organizing opportunities, we actively seek collaborations with local synagogues throughout the year, offering anti-racism workshops to congregants, mobilizing rabbis to speak about specific issues, and cosponsoring public forums. We recently established a Rabbinic Board with the aim of strengthening our relationships with member rabbis and congregations, supporting the work of synagogue social action committees, facilitating communication among social justice-oriented rabbis in the city, and forging a progressive Jewish voice to speak out collectively on pressing issues facing the city.

Progressive Jewish Organizing

JFREJ is not alone in seeking out these connections. While perhaps not yet a full-fledged movement, progressive Jewish organizing has been percolating across the country for several decades and has noticeably gained strength in recent years. National philanthropies such as the Jewish Fund for Justice, the Shefa Fund and Mazon, taking seriously the double meaning of tzedakah (justice/charity), educate Jews about poverty issues while raising money to support community-based anti-poverty efforts. Chicago's Jewish Council on Urban Affairs, founded in 1964, is now joined by local Jewish social justice groups in San Francisco (the Poverty Action Alliance) and Minneapolis-St. Paul (Jewish Community Action) as well as New York. New Jewish Agenda is no longer active on a national level, but local chapters continue in several states.

These organizations join a number of

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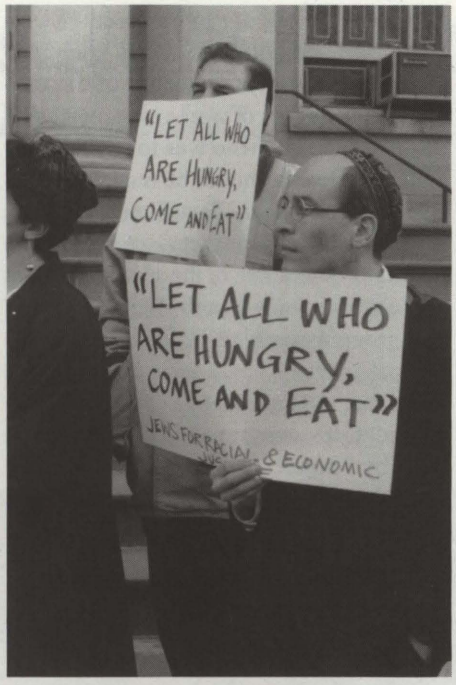
politically active synagogues. While many social action committees confine their work to traditional community service projects, some are active in mobilizing congregants around issues such as welfare reform and immigrant rights. Some Jews who would not otherwise join a synagogue are drawn to (or drawn back to) Jewish communal life by the emphasis that particular congregations place on social justice. A case in point is Congregation B'nai Jeshurun on Manhattan's Upper West Side, whose membership was dwindling until Rabbi Marshall Meyer infused it with his unwavering commitment to social justice. The congregation, which has continued to be politically progressive under the leadership of Rabbi Meyer's successors, is now one of the largest—and fastest-growing—in the city.

In addition to synagogue social action committees, whose work is facilitated in part by denominational clearinghouses such as the Reform Movement's Religious Action Center, new forms of linking spirituality and social action have emerged since the 1970s. The Jewish Renewal movement, which stresses the interconnectedness of spiritual and societal transformation, finds national voice in the writings of rabbis Arthur Waskow and Michael Lerner, and local expression in a number of synagogues and a network of havurot, or fellowships.

Perhaps the combination of religious, ethnic and cultural dimensions wrapped up in Jewish identity makes this particular interplay of secular and faith-based organizing somewhat of an exception. However, numerous examples, from Christian liberation theology to Gandhian non-violence, echo the broader point that faith and organizing can and do combine to create a powerful force for social change, not only strengthening organizing but bringing new life to spirituality as well.



JFREJ activists demonstrate their opposition to proposed cuts to city and state social services during a Passover/ Holy Week speak-out organized by JFREJ and Interfaith Voices Against Hunger. ***Photo courtesy of JFREJ.***

Rachel Rosenbloom is Executive Director of Jews for Racial and Economic Justice. JFREJ received a grant from RESIST in 1995. For more information, contact Jews for Racial and Economic Justice, 64 Fulton Street, Suite 605, New York, NY 10038; 212/ 964-9210; jfrej@igc.org.

Peace Work After the Cold War

Reflections on Quaker Spirituality and Politics

CHUCK FAGER

It is my sense that many Quaker peace activists owed a lot to the Cold War. However oversimplified it might have been as a worldview, it helped many of us figure out what we were against.

But now it's gone, and since the end of the 1980s, peace work among Quakers has been in a state of considerable confusion and diffusion. There is plenty of activity, but mostly on a small scale, with little in the way of direction and coherence. The Gulf War was the last time large numbers of us came together under a common banner.

In one way this fragmentation is lamentable; surely our efforts would gain strength from unity and focus.

But on the other hand, the fact is that it was ever thus among Quakers. Even when Friends had common priorities, like opposition to slavery in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a close look at our history will reveal Quakers pursuing this goal in many different ways, and not always cooperating smoothly or efficiently in the process. Such seeming confusion was often frustrating, but did not necessarily mean their work was irrelevant or ineffective.

> Such influence as [Friends] have in the world is not of the conventional kind: no elected officials fear "the Quaker vote."

So it seems with Quaker peace work in 1997. I've been spending a lot of time exploring this situation, recently completing three years on the staff of Pendle Hill, a Quaker study center near Philadelphia. A major part of my task there was to see if any sense could be made of the current confusion among Friends about peace work.

After carefully surveying the Quaker scene, our main response was to organize two national gatherings, called Quaker Peace Roundtables, in 1995 and 1997. The second of these Round-tables brought together 160 Friends, and was probably the largest assembly of Quakers focused on peace work thus far in the nineties.

Pendle Hill published books of papers from each of these *Roundtables: A Continuing Journey* (1996) and *Sustaining Peace Witness* (1997). Both are available from the Pendle Hill Bookstore (1-800-742-3150), and interested readers might want to look them over to get a better sampling of the current range of action and thought among Friends on peace. (Some related items

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are also available at the Pendle Hill webpage: http//www.quaker.org/pendle-hill.)

In planning these Roundtables, we took care to avoid any semblance of "legislative" activity. That is, there were to be no plenaries arguing over resolutions in solidarity with this, or calling on Congress to stop that, or calling on all true pacifists to do the other.

Why not? The reasons were both practical and principled, and are worth considering briefly.

Practically, Quakers are the very antithesis of the Leninist cadre: Nobody tells us what to do. Further, our numbers are small, our ideologies varied, and such influence as we have in the world is not of the conventional kind: no elected officials fear "the Quaker vote", so political posturing is usually a waste of time. Finally, our "sense of the meeting" decision-making style is an invitation to paralysis, especially in a situation of complex and conflicting forces, like today.

From the perspective of principle, it is an article of Quaker faith that our real direction comes from the spirit, not resolutions; our actions are to be based on voluntary cooperation, rather than party discipline. Moreover, as a matter of discernment, with dozens of wars going on in various places today, who was to say that, for instance, Bosnia should be our central focus, versus Rwanda, East Timor, the various Central Asian conflicts—or landmines, nuclear proliferation, or the arms trade? Not me, certainly, nor Pendle Hill; nor an ad hoc group assembled in Philadelphia for the weekend.

So the format of our Quaker Peace Roundtables combined major presentations by "experts" and practitioners, with many special interest workshops for people with various concerns. The idea was to build morale for continued work, and networking for mutual support, and I think they succeeded. I am hopeful that such Quaker Peace Roundtables could become a regular feature of Quaker life, every two or three years; after all, there should be plenty to work on in the twenty-first century.

In any event, what was the range of Quaker peace action that was in evidence at these assemblies?

Everything from the old reliable, war tax refusal, to work on the streets of Belfast, apartheid South Africa, and violence in Burundi where African Quakers have been victimized by the recent bloodletting. The Alternatives to Violence Programs—a Quaker invention—have been spreading rapidly in prison settings. Some speakers raised issues of corporate power and economic globalization; but there were also Friends from the staff of the U.S. Institute of Peace, where establishment versions of conflict resolution are taking shape. Even the Friends Committee on Unity with Nature was on hand, probing for sources of war in environmental degradation.

There was, however, one genuinely new feature on the program: presentations by a faculty member from the U.S. Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania where they now have a Peacekeeping Institute. This Institute is charged with training the generals of tomorrow to lead "peace" missions as well as to fight battles.

For my money these presentations were among the more intriguing. It is evident that, like peaceniks, the military has had to do some hard thinking about how to operate in the post-Cold War environment. In it they have been presented with a series of missions that are neither war as they know it, nor peace as we think it.

In such situations, conventional military doctrine and training don't apply. Moreover, the commanders of such missions have been obliged to work along with, rather than attempt to command, private groups working in conflict settings. Learning to talk together about the new possibilities opened up by these events seems to us a good and fruitful idea; I hope we'll see more of it.

For the foreseeable future, I expect more of the same from Quaker peace activists: numerous small-scale efforts, taking many approaches to a wide range of situations and issues, from local conflicts to global peace strategizing. If in the next decade there were a series of Quaker Peace Roundtables, or the equivalent, some increased coherence and a rough set of priorities might emerge.

But knowing Quakers, I wouldn't count on it. And overall, that doesn't worry me much.

Chuck Fager is a Quaker and a writer now living in Bellefonte, PA. His website is: http://www.kimopress.com.

March for Justice in North Carolina

People of Faith Put Their Lives on the Line

GAIL S. PHARES

The sun shone hot and strong as 20 of us walked in from eastern North Carolina on Good Friday, March 28, 1996, ending a 100-mile walk. The group included Hispanic farm workers and those of us who have been here a longer time—blacks and whites, young and old.

Along the five-day journey we held Bridge Building Workshops. Based in the Catholic tradition, we used an economic justice "Way of the Cross" to link Jesus' suffering and death with the enormous suffering caused by unjust working conditions, poor housing, racism, and misunderstanding of newly arrived immigrants. We also examined the larger issues behind those conditions, such as how the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) impacts people in Mexico and the United States. More than 100 people from over 20 different faith traditions joined us in Raleigh, North Carolina to complete this pilgrimage.

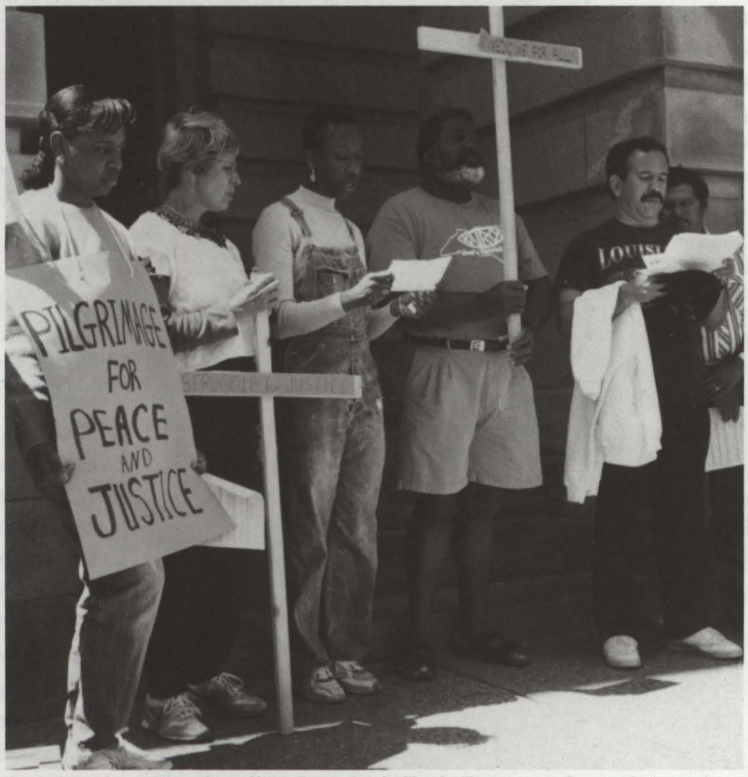
People of faith across the United States are seeking concrete ways to protest worsening conditions of people living in poverty. Often we live these injustices or experience them first-hand. Many of us join delegations to Central America or Haiti, live in the inner city or Appalachia, and see the human results of the economic models promoted by the U.S. government, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

Our faith traditions tell us that we are to work towards a society where all creation, all people have an equitable share in the fruits of the earth. The economy exists for people, not people for the economy. Our relationship with God and one another is violated when some people have much more than they need while many others lack the basic necessities. Jewish people call this struggle for a just society Shalom while Christians name this struggle the Kingdom of God.

The Carolina Interfaith Task Force on Central America and Witness for Peace, with whom I have worked for the past 16 years, create opportunities for people to step outside their comfort zone. Faith-based activists have contact with the people in poverty, as learners, so that they are able to see current reality and thus have their lives transformed. As a result, many beome activists who struggle to create just social structures and policies and to challenge the status quo.

The key is to combine action and reflection, to go among poor and marginal people to learn from them. Another aspect is to create ceremonies or prayer services which call on particular faith traditions as part of our political action. We must design actions which require a measure of courage, risk and a willingness to have one's life changed or transformed. As a Catholic, I am motivated by Christ's teaching in the Gospel of Matthew chapter 25, that nations and people will be judged on the basis of how they treat the hungry, homeless and the most vulnerable members of society.

I know that the religious left is alive and well. We struggle to close the U.S. Army's School of the Americas, we work in groups like Witness for Peace and CITCA, in the Religious Working Group on the World Bank and the IMF, in People of Faith Against the Death Penalty, in the Catholic Worker Communities, in groups of faith who support gay and lesbian rights. We are active in congregations and organizations, working from a faith perspective to make justice and peace happen.



Activists from the Carolina Interfaith Task Force on Central America (CITCA) demonstrate during their Pilgrimage for Peace in April 1996. A grant from Resist supported the march. ***Photo courtesy of CITCA***

Our faith traditions tell us that we are to work towards a society where all creation, all people have an equitable share in the fruits of the earth.

Gail S. Phares is Director of the Carolina Interfaith Task Force on Central America and Southeast Regional Coordinator of Witness for Peace. CITCA received a grant from RESIST this year. For more information, contact CITCA, 1105 Sapling Place, Raleigh, NC 27615.

Women's Human Rights in Malaysia

Islamic Feminists Work to Implement Cultural Mediation

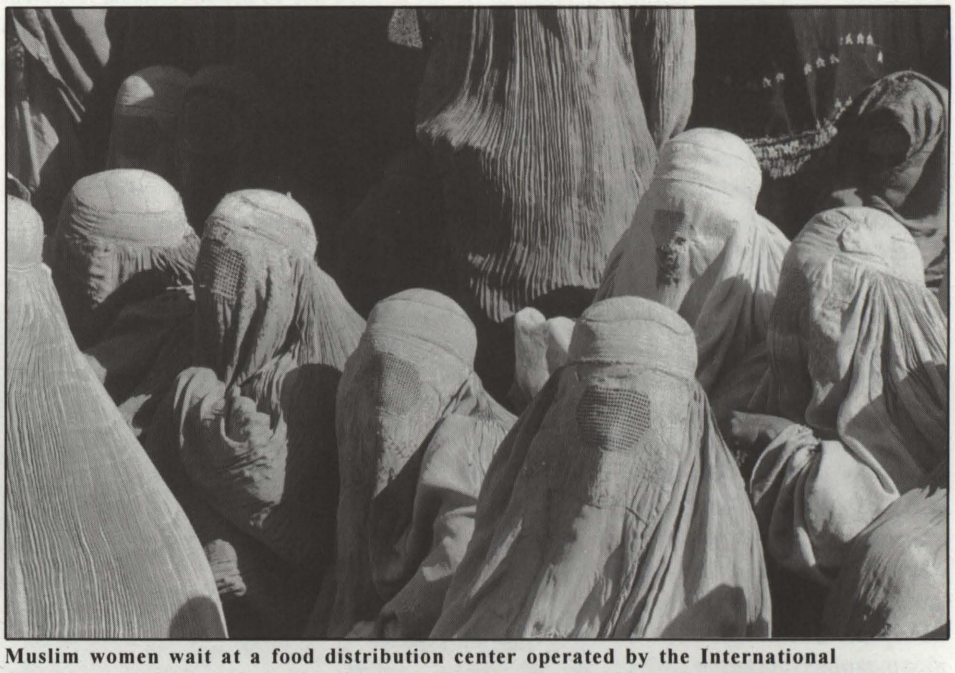
NORANI OTHMAN

Shortly after its founding in 1989, Sisters in Islam (SIS Forum Malaysia) entered the ongoing public debate in Malaysian society on women's equality. SIS is composed of women with diverse backgrounds in sociology and anthropology, law, Islam and Koranic studies, gender studies, social work, media, health, and political science. The group embraces Islam as a liberating religion that at its inception uplifted the status of women and gave them rights that were considered revolutionary 1,400 years ago—the rights to contract marriage, to divorce, and to inherit and dispose of property. SIS seeks to ensure this same spirit of gender equality in Malaysian society today.

SIS asserts that women's human rights are inherent to Islamic religious teachings and that actions taken in the name of Islam to circumscribe those rights are not based on true Islamic principles or their animating concepts. The central Koranic notion of a common ontology, *fitrah*, supports arguments for gender equality and the rights of women and counteracts the prevailing tendency in Islamic societies to define rights and obligations of citizens on the basis of gender and faith. Modern Muslim women face a gap between the ethical principles of Koran on gender equality and the retrogressive, male-centered interpretations that have been codified into Islamic standards, or *Shari'a* law.

Cultural Mediation as a Step For Change

As a strategy for ending women's subordination and implementing human rights in Malaysia, SIS advocates revisiting and reinterpreting Islamic teachings and texts so that women's equality may be understood in religious terms that are authentic and locally persuasive. This process of "cultural mediation," a term coined by Abdullahi An-Na'im, involves recognizing that human rights are conditioned by their sociocultural context. It requires a search for local cultural sources of rights and an open discourse about the meaning and implications of the relevant cultural norms.



Muslim women wait at a food distribution center operated by the International Committee of the Red Cross for citizens of Kabul. ***Photo by Teun Voeten, Impact Visuals***

What is done in the name of Islam today often contravenes Islam's central ideas and animating principles in order to justify patriarchal practices.

The first step in cultural mediation is to acknowledge the power politics behind the formation of cultural norms and their interpretations. What is done in the name of Islam today often contravenes Islam's central ideas and animating principles in order to justify patriarchal practices. Generally speaking, women's rights have been distorted by the increasingly powerful conservative faction of predominantly male Muslims heavily influenced by the dominant parochial views of Islam's Middle Eastern heartlands. What especially concerns Muslim modernists in Malaysia today is the readiness of some of their leaders, who at the overtly political level, directly oppose the "Islamist" agenda and the parties advocating it, to accommodate these tendencies and capitulate piecemeal to fundamentalists' demands for the recodification of modern state law, especially that affecting women.

To counter such biased interpretations and recodification, SIS has actively engaged in cultural mediation with regard to a number of disputes over gender equality in Malaysia. A necessary part of mediation turns upon understanding what is divine in the *Shari'a* law and what, in the scholarly tradition interpreting it, is of human origin. What is divine is the word of Allah in the Koran, the text and all its intention and purposes. The act of interpreting the text—through critical reason, analogy, and consensus—and deriving its meaning and intentions is human, and can therefore be reassessed and reevaluated. Members of SIS, as modern Muslims, seek to develop further the corpus of interpreted

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material. In doing so, their work focuses on cultural and religious reinterpretations of women's roles and rights in the family, community, and society; women's legal and citizenship rights; and women's sexual and reproductive roles and rights.

Polygamy and Family Law

In reference to the ongoing debate on polygamy in Malaysia, for example, SIS and the Association of Women Lawyers submitted comments and recommendations to Prime Minster Mahathir Mohammed in December 1996 to reform Islamic family laws on polygamy. Malaysia in the early 1970s and 1980s conducted a remarkable recodification of its family laws, according to a religious doctrine that allows the state to choose from the opinions of differing schools of law to derive the most socially beneficial standards. Among the reform measures introduced were restrictions on polygamy, which gave the state the power to scrutinize applications by Muslim males to marry a second or subsequent wife to ensure that justice be done to women and children. Subsequent amendments by some states, however, have made it possible for a man merely to make a written or verbal declaration in front of a *Shari'a* judge that he has the economic means to support and provide equally for his wives and treat them fairly, without having to offer proof.

The ongoing debate on polygamy in Malaysia illustrates perfectly the popular misconceptions and fallacious arguments about men's rights, based on assertions of women's inferiority sanctified by religion. Muslim theologians and masters of juristic reasoning have interpreted the Koran's injunctions as allowing polygamy virtually at will. SIS has put forth alternative religious arguments based on Koranic verses, such as 4:3, that state that polygamy is not an unconditional right of every man, but a responsibility to ensure the welfare and protection of widows and orphans, and one to be entered into only if the man could "deal justly" with his wives. Moreover, verse 4:129, which states, "You are never able to be fair and just as between women, even if it is your ardent desire," recognize the impossibility of men treating all their wives equally and justly. These verses in effect express the Koranic view that polygamy is an occasional and circumstantially warranted responsibility, rather than an inalienable right of a Muslim male.

Based on this modernist interpretation, SIS submitted numerous recommendations to the Malaysian government for revising the family laws concerning polygamy, among them greater penalties for men who violate Islamic family law; provisions to ensure that all wives and their dependents are fairly and adequately provided for; a standardized and extensive application process that allows the court to judge a request for a second marriage according to established criteria; provision for a wife to divorce her husband if he takes another wife; the adoption of uniform laws on polygamy by all states; and gender sensitization training for judges, religious officials, and counselors. These recommendations have been received favorably by the Malaysian prime minister's office. Those states that had not yet amended their polygamy laws must now wait until a statewide federal review of the *Shari'a* judicial system is completed.

Conflicts of Primacy Between the Courts

While Malaysia's reformed Islamic family law is one of the most enlightened among Muslim countries, women are unable to exercise their rights fully because of prejudices and weaknesses in the implementation of the law and the *Shari'a* system itself. In March 1997 SIS, in cooperation with two other women's groups, submitted a second memorandum to the Malaysian government; it took a comprehensive look at the Islamic family laws as a whole and proposed reform of the substantive law (or the "letter and spirit of the law"), *Shari'a* court procedures and administration of the courts, and the state religious departments. Again the prime minister has stated publicly that all positive amendments of the Muslim family laws will be considered for the federal government's review of the *Shari'a* system. And SIS, along with other women's groups, is working to publicize its memorandum and conducting training sessions to ensure that women at the grassroots level are informed about the movement to reform family laws and the *Shari'a* justice system. Importantly, male voices are also increasingly joining the call for reform, both to improve the image of Muslim courts and to ensure justice for women.

A Women's Rally in Algiers calls for democracy and women's rights in opposition to the F.I.S. (Islamic Fundamentalists). ***Photo by Janina Struck, Impact Visuals***

The reforms suggested by SIS are intended to improve the delivery and administration of justice in the *Shari'a* system. In Malaysia a parallel legal system of common law courts inherited from British colonialists and *Shari'a* courts, which have primacy over civil matters, exists. The problems that arise as a result of this division are best exemplified by debates over the application of the controversial Domestic Violence Act, which became law in April 1995. SIS, in cooperation with all major Malaysian women's groups, participated in

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multilateral consultations on the drafting of the law, mobilized women to lobby members of Parliament to pass it, and helped run legal literacy workshops for women to explain the law's importance. At the time of its passing, a number of Islamic scholars and state functionaries within the various Islamic departments maintained that the act would only apply to non-Muslims because of the primacy of the *Shari'a* court in Islamic family matters.

SIS responded by saying that in all matters the primacy principle is justice. The rejection by Muslim scholars of common law in the name of Islamization is perverse because it violates Koranic principles of social justice. Muslim family laws usually leave women unprotected; *Shari'a* courts generally send the victimized woman home to reconcile with her husband and preserve her marriage.

Compounding the inadequacy of *Shari'a* courts in dealing with women's issues is the dominant practice in Malaysia of only appointing men to be judges under *Shari'a* law. Neither the Koran nor the remarks attributed to the Prophet Muhammad holds that a woman cannot be a leader or by extension hold public office. Rather, SIS and other groups have identified numerous religious sources that do not discriminate between men and women in their abilities to serve the public.

In opposing the Domestic Violence Act in the name of *Shari'a* and continuing to prevent Muslim women from becoming *Shari'a* court judges, Islamists are failing to uphold one of Islam's central tenets—that Muslims must continuously apply Islam's broad legal principles to emerging social and historical realities. They are ignoring the vast changes that have occurred in the lives of all Muslims, especially Muslim women, during the 1,400 years since the formative movement in Islam.

By grounding human rights in Islamic cultural traditions and religious teachings, SIS hopes that the women's movement in Malaysia can avoid being construed as an unwelcome foreign or secular idea and come to be understood in the context of local religious norms, requirements, and laws. Like many modernist groups, SIS is encouraging a discourse among all Muslims in which informed critical reasoning and cultural mediation can take place. Muslims today must confront the claim by militant resurgent Islamist forces that their interpretation of Islam is "universal" and the only legitimate view for all Muslims at all times. As with Western conceptions of universal human rights, this claim of universality needs to be negotiated and challenged within the internal discourse of contemporary Muslim societies.

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Buddhist Villagers Reclaim Forest

KAMOL SUKIN

Early one Wednesday morning last July, a fleet of cars left the city of Chiang Mai along the road to Sankampareng district. Their destination, a formal area just beyond Huay Kaew village a little over an hour away.

Among the passengers were well-known academics, environmentalists, priests and monks. They were on their way to celebrate a heroic deed accomplished by Huay Kaew villagers eight years ago and to commemorate the death of one villager who lost his life.

The story of Huay Kaew is one of the most notable examples of the forest protection movement in Thailand. The village was the first to show public and government officials that local villagers could protect their local environment.

Eight years ago the site was designated by the Royal Forestry Department (RFD) as a "deteriorated area" and suitable to be leased out for fruit growing. The villagers, however, disagreed and petitioned the authorities concerned to allow them to protect the trees.

Today the area is covered by thick forest, a testament to the villager's victory and it was here that last week's eighth anniversary celebrations took place.

Monk's robes were tied around the tallest trees by the roadside, marking an entrance into the once threatened jungle. Other trees were adorned with hand-made wooden crosses. A boy sat behind a small table and handed out leaflets containing a history of the villager's efforts to protect the area.

Remembering Villagers' Defiance

Nearby, a small monument marked the grave of villager Nit Chaiwanna, his photo surrounded by roses. Part of the day's ceremony would be to recall his contribution to the protest activities which cost him his life.

Nit was a headmaster of Huay Kaew school who joined villagers in their call for a community forest. He was murdered by local kamnan after defying local officials and continuing to support the villagers.

"Here it is," said one environmentalist, who has joined the villagers to celebrate every year over the last eight. "This area

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was a battlefield between Huay Kaew villagers and workers of a local politician's wife. The villagers blockaded the workers who were hired to cut down the trees and level the land to prepare it for the growing of mangoes."

"The story is simple," Thaweesin Sriruang, a village leader said. "Before the conflict, local villagers used the forest surrounding their community in various ways, like a supermarket. We harvested mushrooms, herbs, vegetables, as well as taking firewood from dead branches in the area."

"Then, one day, workers cut down the trees and leveled the land to grow mangoes. It was a forest reserve, but they said their boss had already leased the area from the authorities. That was the start of history."

Their boss was Pramern Chinnewatra, the wife of Chiang Mai MP Suraphan Chinnewatra. "The RFD leased the forest area to Pramern for very little. We questioned whether the amount was on account of the political clout of her husband," Thaweesin recalled.

Pramern leased 235 rai of forest land and encroached on another 140 rai, Thaweesin said. In response, the villagers surrounded the area, preventing her workers from falling more trees.

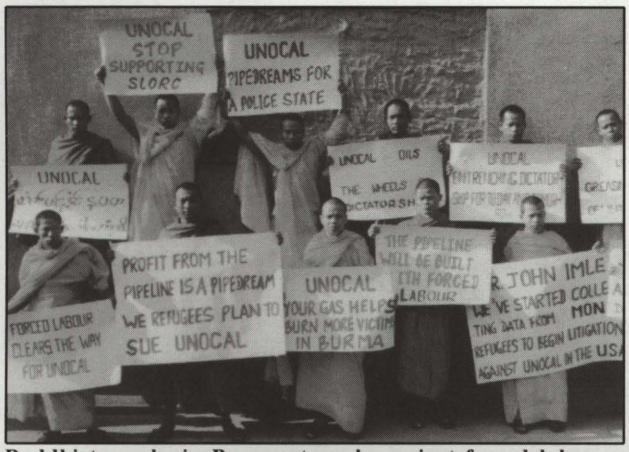
The baud paa ceremony became the most effective weapon in the villagers' arsenal. By "ordaining" the trees, just as a novice is ordained as a monk, they could not be destroyed by the workers.

The struggle to protect the area was also marked by a protracted court case after Pramern charged a number of villagers, as well as a Chiang Mai University (CMU) student, with trespassing. The villagers attracted the support of CMU's Student Union, non-government organizations, and CMU academics.

Their efforts were a success. On December 23, 1989, RFD Director General Phairoj Suwannakorn announced during a visit to the site that the lease agreement with Pramern would be revoked and the villagers would be allowed to manage the 1,600 rai forest area.

Huay Kaew became a test case for the idea of "community forests" and a landmark decision in the development of the Community Forest Bill, which is currently waiting parliamentary approval.

About 30 percent of the villagers are



Buddhist monks in Burma struggle against forced labor used to construct a pipeline. ***Photo courtesy of Center for Constitutional Rights***

Christian and, to reflect this, the ceremony was attended by priests from the Church of Chiang Mai who delivered a sermon and marked the area with crosses. Their words were followed by the ordination ceremony, a rite which northern Buddhists have long used in forest conservation.

"God told Christians to administrate, possess and protect nature, including forests. But humans have become reckless and bold. They are overconfident and think they are God. Good Christians must obey God to protect the forest," said Christian priest Anan Leraman.

"I am very impressed to see there are no borders between two religions which teach the same core message. Buddhism teaches Buddhists to respect nature while God teaches Christians to obey his word in protecting Mother Nature," said Chalardchai Ramitanond, a lecturer from CMU's Faculty of Social Science.

Pinkaew Luang-aramari of the Project for Ecological Recovery supported the villagers during their struggle. She said that other calls for community forests will be unsuccessful if the lessons of Huay Kaew are not heeded.

"The system of Thai authorities shows how difficult it is for local villagers to speak out to the public. Even the press who covered the confrontation site were blocked by local officials. It was a very tough situation," she recalled.

Mae-on district forestry official Chaiwat Thaplook said that community forests are not a new idea, but more the traditional way of life of local villagers. "You must have the confidence to continue the community forest practice. Forestry officials always come and go, but you [villagers] will say here for a long time," he told the gathering.

Kamol Sukin is a reporter for Bangkok's English-language newspaper The Nation. *This article is exerpted from his story published July 22, 1997.*

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